

Message Text

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TAGS: PFOR, PINT, TS

SUBJECT: PSD DIRECTOR SAYAH ANNOUNCES BOURGUIBA'S RETURN

L BEFORE END OF DECEMBER

1. ALL TUNISIAN DAILY PAPERS ON DECEMBER 7 GAVE FRONT-PAGE COVERAGE OF REMARKS MADE BY PSD PARTY CHIEF MOHAMED SAYAH IN PARIS ON DECEMBER 5, IN WHICH HE STATED PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH HAD SO IMPROVED DURING GENEVA CONVALESCENCE THAT HE "WILL RETURN TO TUNISIA BEFORE THE END OF THE MONTH. ACCORDING TO REPORTS, SAYAH MADE THIS STATEMENT AT A MEETING OF PSD MEMBERS LIVING IN PARIS AREA. (FYI: PARTY HAS CELLS THROUGHOUT FRANCE AND OTHER WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES WHERE MANY TUNISIANS ARE EMPLOYED AS IMMIGRANT WORKERS.) NO FURTHER REFERENCES WERE MADE REGARDING PRESIDENT'S HEALTH EXCEPT THAT HE HAD BEEN SUFFERING FROM "FATIGUE."

2. SAYAH WAS PASSING THROUGH PARIS ON RETURN FROM HIS TRIP TO LESOTHO WHERE HE ATTENDED AFRO-AMERICAN CONFERENCE. HE RETURNED TO TUNIS EVENING OF DECEMBER 5, FOLLOWING PARIS PARTY MEETING EARLER IN DAY. IN HIS AIRPORT ARRIVAL STATEMENT HE PRAISED RESULTS OF LESOTHO CONFERENCE AND "CLOSE UNDERSTANDING WHICH DEVELOPED BETWEEN AFRICAN PARTICIPANTS AND GROUP OF U.S. SENATORS WHO ATTENDED," BUT MADE NO FURTHER REFERENCE TO PRESIDENT'S DECEMBER RETURN.

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3. COMMENT: SAYAH'S STATEMENT ON BOURGUIBA COMES AT TIME OF INCREASED SPECULATION OVER PRESIDENT'S HEALTH AND HIS ABILITY TO GOVERN EFFECTIVELY. GOT, EVIDENTLY WISHING TO QUASH SUCH RUMORS, HAS TWICE IN LAST MONTH SHOWN IN PRESS AND ON TV A VIGOROUS AND GESTICULATING PRESIDENT WALKING IN GENEVA GARDENS WITH PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA. FIRST SUCH CONSULTATION TOOK PLACE IN GENEVA IN EARLY NOVEMBER AND SECOND WAS ANNOUNCED TO HAVE OCCURRED ON DECEMBER 2. ALTHOUGH GOT HAS SO FAR MADE NO STATEMENT REGARDING PRESIDENT'S RETURN, SAYAH'S REMARKS CAN BE CONSIDERED OFFICIAL AS THEY WERE REPORTED BOTH IN PARTY AND GOVERNMENT DAILIES. IN VIEW OF POLITICAL IMPORTANCE GIVEN TO MATTER, HOWEVER, IT IS ODD THAT SAYAH RATHER THAN PRIME MINISTER WOULD HAVE MADE ANNOUNCEMENT OF PRESIDENT'S IMPENDING RETURN AND THAT LOCUS OF ANNOUNCEMENT WOULD BE IN PARIS RATHER THAN TUNIS. SAYAH IS ALSO A MEMBER OF GOVERNMENT (MINISTER DELEGATE TO PRIME MINISTER), AND WE SUSPECT HIS BEATING NOUIRA TO PUNCH MAY HAVE BEEN ACT OF POLITICAL ONEUPMANSHP FREQUENTLY PRACTICED IN SENIOR GOT CIRCLES. SAYAH OBVIOUSLY HAD PERSONAL HAND IN MANAGING RELEASE OF NEWS, WHICH CAN BE VIEWED SOMETHING OF "SCOOP." WHILE INTENT IS CLEARLY TO REASSURE TUNISIAN PEOPLE THAT PRESIDENT CONTINUES TO REGAIN HIS STRENGTH AND WILL AGAIN TAKE CHARGE SHORTLY, SAYAH, AS WELL AS GOVERNMENT COULD BE SERIOUSLY EMBARRASSED IF FOR SOME REASON BOURGUIBA IS UNABLE TO RETURN AS PREDICTED. MULCAHY

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